



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
BETHESDA, MARYLAND 20014

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Dr. Maxine Singer
Laboratory of Biochemistry
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Building 37, Rm. 4A01

Dear Maxine:

This letter is to ask your reaction to an idea that I have had concerning the ticklish problem of fairness and honesty in adherence to the spirit of the guidelines on recombinant DNA. Obviously, the guidelines apply to only a fraction of the laboratories in the world, or even in the U. S., that will be doing such research. Many countries will adopt comparable guidelines, but it seems likely that some will not. Will such a country, or some lab in it become the mecca for sabbaticals? What will the pressures be on scientists in the U. S. and other countries that adopt the guidelines if there is a flagrant, or even a significant degree of covert disregard of them by a few such labs?

Is it reasonable to expect all scientists to adhere to the guidelines, even if they feel they are unnecessary and are not legally required to adhere to them? I think that it is, and that trying to get this principle accepted is a major problem for the general scientific community. If this is accepted, how can broad compliance be obtained?

A related problem is how does a student, technician, or fellow blow the whistle on a researcher who he thinks is acting irresponsibly, without unduly jeopardizing his own career? This type of problem has come to my attention twice, where a graduate student sees what he thinks are flagrant violations of the letter or spirit of the guidelines, but does not know where to turn for backing.

To me, the approach to both these problems is peer pressure. It is a powerful lever, it extends across national borders, it's free, flexible, and requires no input from politicians. To use it for the problems cited above, might require only setting up some type of informal or formal "rumor control center" where complaints could be received and inquiries sent out to the accused lab, stating what the apparent problem is, and asking for clarification, without revealing the identity of the complainant. If this were handled by well known scientists who have no vested interest, I would be rather surprised if the inquiries would be answered untruthfully, callously, or legalistically. If the response was not satisfactory to the initial and further inquiries, an escalating sequence of pressures could be brought to bear: inquiries to colleagues, then to the university president or institute director, advice to key journals that the biohazard statement in papers from that lab may not be truthful, the possibility of circulating the names of persons considered flagrant, unresponsive offenders, with consequent threat of ostracism from invitations for seminars and meetings, from colleagues going to work in the tainted lab, etc.

This is admittedly a very thorny area, but such a program might be an immensely useful device.

Please think about it, and send me your thoughts.

Sincerely yours,



Wallace P. Rowe, M.D.
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National Institute of Allergy and
Infectious Diseases

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Mexine - I have sent this to Paul Berg and David Baltimore as well; feel free to show it to anyone you please.

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